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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 007423

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [KPAL](#) [EG](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: RAFAH-GAZA BORDER: EGYPT STRUGGLES TO SUPPORT
PALESTINIANS WHILE PROTECTING ITS OWN SECURITY

REF: A. CAIRO 7418

[B](#). CAIRO 7323

[C](#). CAIRO 7297

[D](#). CAIRO 7210

[E](#). CAIRO 7158

Classified by Charge Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) The recent chaos on the Rafah-Gaza border laid bare Egypt's dilemma of trying to balance its strong support for Palestinian statehood with its efforts to prevent extremism in Egypt. Clearly caught unprepared by the influx of people into Egypt from Gaza, Cairo's "humanitarian" response to the crisis averted political and security fallout that a stiffer response might have provoked. Cairo also chose not to publicly criticize Israel for prompting the episode with its earlier-than-expected departure from the Philadelphi Strip. With the border now officially closed, and Egypt's new Border Guard Force in place, attention has reverted back to the complex negotiations over how people and goods will transit between Egypt and Gaza. The GOE understands that it must work hand-in-hand with Israel as it endeavors to resolve Gaza border issues. The GOE's primary objective throughout the crisis has been to support and strengthen Abu Mazen domestically, while maintaining channels of communication with the Israelis. End summary.

Gaza: The Sharp End of the Horn

[2](#). (C) Having had the sole responsibility of administering Gaza at several points over the past half-century or so (i.e., 1949-1956; 1957-1967), Egypt fully understands the risks involved in trying to manage the passions and aspirations within the world's most densely-populated piece of real estate. Among the most daunting and complex challenges for Egypt is the balancing act it must pursue in leading Arab support for the eventual attainment of Palestinian statehood, while also seeking to prevent Palestinian extremism from seeping across its borders.

What Happened at the Gaza-Rafah Border?

[3](#). (C) Israel's September 11 withdrawal from the Philadelphi Corridor and the ensuing influx of Gazans into Egypt took the Egyptians by surprise. The GOE expected the IDF to pull out in conjunction with the start of its planned September 15 deployment of a new 750-man Border Guard Force (BGF). The absence of adequate border forces on both sides of the no-man's zone during the intervening period was the principal factor leading to the crisis. The shooting death of a young Gazan (details remain murky) by GOE forces during the initial confusion also was reportedly used as an excuse by Palestinian militants to justify blowing up sections of the Israeli-built concrete and metal barriers. A day after Israel's September 11 withdrawal, PA and Egyptian forces could only watch as tens of thousands of Palestinians and Egyptians flowed freely across what had long been one of the most tightly controlled crossing points in the region. The meager GOE police force, we understand, was instructed to monitor the flow of people and try to stop the most obvious attempts to smuggle weapons and drugs across the border.

Putting the Cork Back in the Bottle, "Humanely"

[4](#). (C) Once the controls along the Philadelphi zone had collapsed, Cairo ordered its security forces at the border to adopt a "humanitarian" approach rather than try to resist the enormous crowds. Photos of GOE forces shooting Gazans along the border would have damaged Egyptian and PA political interests both at home and abroad. As thousands of Ministry of Interior riot police were rushed to the scene, local security elements sought to establish a presence in order to at least visually monitor who was coming and going from Gaza. While foodstuffs, cigarettes, and other highly sought-after consumer goods comprised the majority of the smuggling, some

drugs and arms apparently also crossed the border during this hectic period.

15. (C) It wasn't until the evening of September 19 that the border was finally sealed, with numerous barricades repaired, PA forces ensconced on their side of the border, and Egypt's armed BGF deployed along the full 14-kilometer long zone. In conversations with the Embassy, Egyptian officials assured us that action would be taken to contain the situation and seal the border. Significantly, they never over-promised, and in a relatively methodical manner succeeded in bringing the situation to a close. During the fracas, the MOD-controlled BGF was careful to avoid armed confrontation with Palestinians. However, should there again be large-scale attempts at infiltration by throngs of Palestinian civilians, it is not clear if the BGF would use force or continue to respond in a "humanitarian" manner.

16. (C) On a positive note, despite strong misgivings within the GOE over the way the IDF managed its departure from the Philadelphia Corridor, public criticism of Israel was carefully contained in the Egyptian media throughout the episode. Egyptian state media essentially made a virtue of necessity by warmly welcoming the Palestinian "brothers," who it said had jubilantly crossed the border to reunite with long-separated family members. Nevertheless, some opposition papers did not shy away from emphasizing the dangers of entry by Palestinian extremists (particularly Hamas) into Egypt. Only with the September 23-24 exchange of violence between Israel and Gaza militants, have Egyptian officials commented critically on the situation in Gaza, calling for restraint on all sides. Egypt's policy remains focused on strengthening Abu Mazen and the PA in their struggle against Hamas and other Islamic extremist groups.

Whither the Rafah Terminal?

17. (C) At present, the border between Egypt and Gaza remains formally closed. Since September 19, however, two managed exchanges of Gazans and Egyptians reportedly took place, with several thousand Palestinians (with valid ID) permitted to return to Gaza and several hundred Egyptians (also with valid ID) returned to Sinai September 20. Similarly, another exchange took place over 48-hours September 23/24 for Gazan students and urgent medical cases requiring entry to Egypt, and several hundreds of Palestinians departing Egypt for Gaza. Stragglers on the wrong side of the border may be stuck for some time as the priority now has turned to the difficult negotiations between Israel, Egypt, and the PA to determine the future of the Terminal and other border crossings between Israel and Gaza.

18. (C) The GOE's primary objective throughout the Rafah border crisis was to support and strengthen Abu Mazen domestically, while maintaining channels of communication with the Israelis. The weekend missile attacks and violence between Israelis and Gazan militant groups underscores the urgency of reaching agreement on all of the Gaza crossings quickly before events spin out of control there. Israel's recent sealing of the West Bank and Gaza following the recent spate of violence prevented a planned September 25 GOE-PA Ministerial meeting in Cairo and may hinder the scheduled visit to Egypt of Abu Mazin on September 29.

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JONES